

Mary Ellen through the Ages



MARY ELLEN THROUGH THE AGES

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Chapter I

OLA, THE LITTLE CAVE GIRL

The following is Mary Ellen's first act of the seven:

*"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages."*

GRANDFATHER, his hand resting on Mary Ellen's curly head, which lay against his knee, wondered what she was thinking about so seriously.

"What is it, dear?" he finally asked. "Maybe Grandfather can help you understand."

"I wish you would, Grandfather," the child answered, sitting up very straight on her low stool and looking into his wise, kind old face. "Today, when I wanted to play instead of doing my work, something inside of my mind kept whispering that I must do the work first and then play. Mother-dear said it was my conscience, but what is my conscience, and how did it know what to tell me?"

Grandfather laughed softly. "Your conscience, dear, is the memory of the lessons you have learned long ago in other lives. Per-

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haps sometime you played when you should have worked, and something happened which your soul remembers and whispers a warning now when you forget."

"I wish I could remember what it was," sighed Mary Ellen. "Why can't we remember about our other lives?"

Grandfather patted her head. "Often, dear, it is best not to remember until we are far along the Path. Then we shall understand. Sometime, when you grow wiser, you may look into the Memory of Nature where all these pictures are kept and read the story of your many lives."

Mary Ellen cuddled close to his knee and coaxed softly, "Can't you open the book for me, Grandfather, and let me see some of the pictures?"

For a moment Grandfather hesitated, then answered gently, "Yes, dear, I can open the book and give you a glimpse of some of its wonderful pictures. Lean your head against my knee and we shall turn back the pages to long, long ago when the world was very young.

As he spoke it seemed to Mary Ellen that a dark curtain parted and swung back, allowing her to look through a wide window upon a great cliff of broken, reddish rocks curving about a little white beach through which flowed a wide, slow-moving river. Leaning over the top of the cliff and crowding down to the river's edge on each side were dark woods, while over all the scene lay the hot golden glow of sunlight, causing little heat waves to shimmer up from the shining sand and the huge red boulders.

A fire burned before a dark hole at the foot of the cliff, shooting its yellow flames into the hot sunlit air, while nearby on a huge fur rug sat an old man, naked except for the skin of some animal which hung about his waist. He was busily chipping bits of flint into arrow and spear heads, while near him lay a great pile of finished arrows and a few heavy spears.

As Mary Ellen gazed with eager eyes, she saw the slender form of a little dark-skinned girl come from the cave carrying a chubby brown baby boy in her arms. Carefully she laid him down on the skin beside the old man, where he began playing with the arrow heads and cooing like any happy baby of today. As the little girl stood watching the two, the old man glanced up and spoke in

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queer clicking words, which, in some strange way, Mary Ellen was able to understand. "Ola, the food for the fire is almost gone. You know you must watch the fire today, for I cannot walk without help and your mother and father are gone to the hunting."

"Yes, old one, I will," answered the little Ola, but she sat down as she spoke and began tying her coarse black hair with a piece of twisted grass.

The flames sank lower and the old man picked up the last few sticks which lay close to him and threw them onto the coals. As the fire blazed up again, he spoke sternly. "Ola, the fire-food is all gone. When the fire has eaten these, then it will die and we shall have nothing to keep the beasts from our cave."

The little Ola leaped to her feet and laughed. "I will bring wood quickly from the beach, old one," and still laughing she ran to the river's edge where great piles of driftwood were lying, but here she found some strange shells washed upon the beach and sat down to look at them and wonder at their shining colors.

Slowly the fire burned lower, and back in the edge of the forest a skulking shadowy form drew closer.

Again the old arrow maker called, and Ola answered that she was coming, but by that time she had found some tiny tracks in the wet sand and was following them down the shore dangerously far from the shelter of the cave, until at last she came to where the maker of the tracks had slipped into the water and disappeared. Here she wriggled her little brown toes in the cool wet sand and began to dig a little cave and make a cliff behind it of the many rocks lying about. That was such fun that she forgot the dying fire, but danger, in those days, was never far away and cave children had need of keen eyes and ears. It was well for little Ola that the slinking beast, who crept so silently from the bushes near her, stepped on a tiny dry twig, for the little snap was enough warning to enable her to reach a nearby tree and scramble to safety before the great cave hyena could reach her.

Oh, how frightened she was. She whimpered softly as she clung to the branches; then she saw the ugly beast below stop in his leapings against the tree and listen for from the direction of the cave came a shrill yell from the arrow maker, followed by savage snarls and growls.

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She knew what that meant; knew that with the fire no longer on guard at the cave door, some beast had attacked the crippled old man and the tiny baby brother. What a bitter feeling of shame crept over her! If they were killed she would be to blame. She must do something, but how could she get down from her tree with the hyena waiting below? Desperately she tore off limbs and bark and hurled them down, trying to drive him away, but not until a louder sound of snarls came from the cave did he turn and leap off to join in the battle.

Then how quickly Ola slid to the ground and raced with flying feet toward the cave. As she ran into the little opening a terrible sight met her eyes. Down on his knees, with the baby brother between him and the cave wall, battled the brave old arrow maker, fighting with his heavy flint-tipped spear a savage hyena, and as Ola cried out in terror, the one which had attacked her joined its mate in the battle about the cave door.

Only for a tiny moment did the little cave girl hesitate, then she snatched some dry limbs from under a huge tree and fled toward the cave. It was their only chance. If some of the red coals still lay in the ashes they would eat this dry wood and live and grow into fire again. On silent feet she slipped behind the snarling beasts and dropped the dry wood on the bed of ashes, then, as the hyenas whirled to attack her, she scrambled up the broken wall of the cliff.

For a moment it looked as if the fire were dead, but at last came a tiny crackling sound, a little puff of smoke drifted up, and a tongue of yellow light ran up a dry limb, then, reaching the heavier branches, burst into a quick rush of leaping flame. For one moment the beasts hesitated, but as the flames leaped still higher, they whirled and fled into the forest.

Swiftly Ola slipped down and picked up the frightened baby to cuddle it in her arms. The old arrow maker leaned wearily against the wall and the little girl, bowing her head in shame, dropped on her knees before him. Gently he lifted his hand and smoothed her rough dark hair. He spoke no word, but as he picked up the little stone hammer and began chipping a new head for the big spear, which had been broken in the struggle, little Ola laid the now quiet baby on the rug and ran to the big pile of driftwood on the beach to gather great loads of wood which she heaped by the cave door.

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"Shall we close the book of the past, my dear?" asked Grandfather softly. Quickly Mary Ellen sat up. "Oh, Grandfather," she cried, her eyes big with interest, "what terrible beasts those were. I am sure Ola never let the fire die out again."

Grandfather smiled. "No, dear, and as Ola in that long-ago day, you learned that duty must always come first. Do you wonder your conscience whispered a warning today when you wanted to play before your work was done?"

Mary Ellen shook her head, then whispered, "I'm glad the old arrow maker and the baby weren't hurt. I wonder what made him a cripple."

Grandfather smiled again. "He was clawed by a cave tiger," he said quietly. "You see the old arrow maker was myself, and I remember."

Mary Ellen threw her arms about her grandfather's neck and kissed his wrinkled cheek. "Oh, you were a dear grandfather even then when you chipped flints by the cave door; no wonder I love you so much now."



Chapter II

NETETIS, THE LITTLE EGYPTIAN GIRL

The following is Mary Ellen's second act of the seven:

GRANDFATHER, did I ever live in Egypt?" asked Mary Ellen one evening as she sat by the fire with her head against his knee.

"Yes, dear, long ago when the great pyramid was being built. Shall we open the book of the past at that page?"

At Mary Ellen's eager nod, he passed his hand gently before her eyes. The flickering firelight changed swiftly to the golden glow of sunshine over a high-walled Egyptian garden. The heat of the afternoon seemed to have filled the place with quiet. An ibis stood sleepily upon one long leg in the edge of a lotus-fringed pool, his big head and black beak tucked under his wing. The leaves of the fig trees drooped lazily and only the soft buzz of a bee exploring a clump of bright flowers broke the silence. A winding path led from the pool to a high, narrow doorway, guarded by two carved sphinxes, who watched the garden with calm stony eyes.

Suddenly Mary Ellen heard a quick burst of childish laughter and a slim white-clad figure flashed into view from the corner of the

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garden, followed more quietly by a fat old slave wearing a bright colored head scarf and a loin cloth.

"The Lady Netetis forgets that old Nefu cannot run as swiftly as she can," he was grumbling, but the little girl only laughed a soft teasing laugh as she answered.

"Thee knows, Nefu, that thou art only fat and lazy. Look, almost thee grows as lazy as old Neetoo here and he does not even catch his own fish, but waits for me to feed him." Laughing gaily she held out some bits of wheat cakes to the ibis, who stalked gravely to the edge of the pool and gobbled them greedily from her hand.

Brushing the crumbs from her fingers, Netetis coaxed sweetly, "Come, Nefu, play ball with me. It will do thee good to run."

The old slave smiled at her teasing and taking a ball of soft colored wool from his girdle tossed it to her. It was a merry game which Mary Ellen watched in the Egyptian garden of so long ago. Netetis' little sandaled feet flashed about over the white sand, her jeweled armbands and the golden fillet which bound her black hair glittered in the slanting rays of the sun, while her soft laughter rang out when old Nefu would fail to catch the ball. At last an unlucky throw landed the ball in the lotus pool from which Nefu had to rescue it by wading.

As they sat in the shade of the fig tree waiting for the ball to dry, a man, clad in snowy linen belted with gold and with a golden band about his straight black hair, came into the garden and stood listening to Netetis' merry chatter for a moment before he called her name. Instantly the slave rose and stood with bowed head while Netetis ran to the newcomer with a quick little cry of "Father, I did not know that thee had returned."

Stooping he kissed her and answered, "A command has come from our Lord Pharaoh—may life bloom for him, with health and strength—desiring me to go to the great pyramid he is having builded for his tomb and report upon the work. Thy mother says that thee, with Leah, thy maid, and Nefu, may go with me. Make haste for the boat lies ready."

Swiftly the scene changed before Mary Ellen's eyes. Glimpses of the Nile, its many boats black against the sunset-colored waters, flashed past; gleaming walls of mighty temples, the deep music

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of the evening song to Tum, the descending sun god, and at last the great city of Memphis. This, too, blurred from sight and when the picture cleared again she saw Netetis being carried on a litter along a well-traveled road, while her father drove his chariot close beside her. The black slaves, who carried their little mistress so carefully, threaded their way through groups of other slaves bearing baskets of grain and food; little donkeys, loaded with lettuce and garlic and long black radishes, plodded sleepily along, while chariots pulled by fiery horses rushed swiftly by, leaving a hovering cloud of dust.

Ahead of them could be seen the great pyramid looming hugely against the blue sky. Long lines of toiling slaves, struggling with great blocks of stone, wound their way up the huge ramp which led to the top. Already the sun was pouring his heat down upon them. Little heat waves danced in the air and choking clouds of dust rose from the trampled ground. Here and there among the busy crowd ran water carriers. Some were pouring the water beneath the stone blocks to make the pulling easier, while others tilted their jars to let the thirsty drink.

One little boy shyly offered Netetis a drink, filling a gilded cup which Leah handed him, and bowing low as Netetis thanked him sweetly, then he darted off at the gruff call of an overseer. He was so slim and frail that the heavy jar seemed too great a load as he lifted it to let the man drink. Perhaps it was too heavy, for the jar fell and broke upon the sand.

With a harsh word the overseer lifted his heavy whip and struck the crouching lad, knocking him onto the sand where he lay as if dead.

With a quick little cry Netetis flung back the curtains of her litter and ran swift as a bird to where the boy lay in the trampled dust.

"How dared thee do such a thing?" she cried, stamping her sandaled foot with anger. "Hast thou no pity in thy heart?"

The man bowed low before her as he muttered, "What matters it, princess? He is but a slave of which there are thousands here."

For a moment Netetis faced him, her dark eyes blazing in her haughty little Egyptian face, then as the injured boy uttered a low moan, she snatched up a piece of the jar in which a bit of water remained and held it to his lips.

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Suddenly her father pushed his way through the crowd of slaves and stooped over her. "What means this, Netetis?" he asked sternly. "Thee knows thee should not leave thy litter."

Springing to her feet, Netetis caught his hand and poured forth the story of the cruel blow. As she talked, her father's frown grew dark and he turned to the man who had followed him.

"What means this, Ka-aperu? Art thy overseers allowed to beat children?"

Ka-aperu bowed his round, shaven head nearly to the ground. "They are not, my lord prince, allowed to abuse a child, although the older slaves need ever a stern hand. I promise thee I shall make an example of this fellow."

Netetis' father nodded approval, but Netetis was not satisfied, for she tugged at his sleeve and asked wistfully, "Canst thou not buy him for me, father? Thee knows Nefu grows old and fat and loves best to sleep."

Her father laughed, then looked at the lad, now standing unsteadily nearby. After a moment he turned to the chief overseer.

"Does thee know the lad? I would not like him in my household if he be not of clean blood."

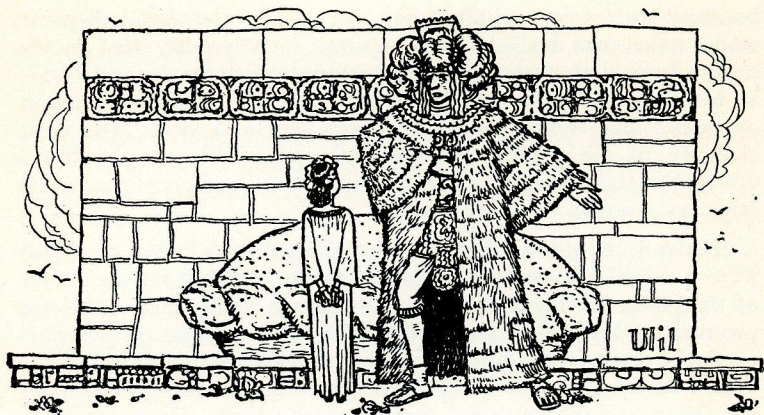
Ka-aperu shrugged his thick shoulders as he answered, "Ameni's people died in the plague last year and he has served since as water boy. I think thee would find him a good slave, although he looks so frail."

For a moment the Prince looked at Ameni, listening so anxiously, then he laid his hand on the boy's dark hair. "Go with thy mistress, Ameni, and let the slaves dress thy wound. I go to complete thy purchase."

Tears filled Ameni's dark eyes as he fell upon his knees and kissed the prince's sandaled feet, then turned and, bowing his face into the dust, he lifted Netetis' little foot and placed it upon his head in token that he would serve as her willing slave forever.

"Oh, grandfather," sighed Mary Ellen, as the picture faded, "I am so happy that I saved that little slave boy when I was Netetis."

Grandfather smiled. "He became a wonderful man in Egypt, dear. You gave him his freedom and many lives later he repaid his debt to you a thousand fold."



Chapter III

ULIL, THE LITTLE MAYAN GIRL

The following is Mary Ellen's third act of the seven:

WHERE shall we open the book this time?" asked Mary Ellen, as she cuddled into Grandfather's lap. For a moment Grandfather listened to the rain tapping against the windows and the soft sputter and hiss of the blazing logs in the fireplace before he answered softly, "Would you like to see how Ameni, the little slave boy you saved in Egypt, repaid his karmic debt to you? Every debt, as you know, dear, must be paid, no matter how many lives may pass, and Ameni, who was reborn in Mayan days as the warrior Istayul, the son of a great chief, paid his by the greatest sacrifice he could give. Look thou into the past my child, and see!"

* * * *

Clear against the burning blue of the sky a great temple reared its carved and painted walls upon the summit of a smooth white pyramid of stone. A steep flight of narrow steps, guarded on each side by the carved and gilded length of a feathered serpent, emblem of Kulkulkan, the god of the ancient Mayas, led to the altar before the temple's wide doorway. The great plaza facing the flight of steps,

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bordered with steles and altars and ringed with gleaming palaces of white stone, was brilliant with a surging, gorgeously clad multitude, whose dark faces, beneath feathered head-dresses and bands of beaten gold, were turned anxiously upward to the little group of priests and warriors grouped about the high altar. The clear chanting of the priests and the dull roll of the temple drums vibrated in the still hot air, while from the waiting people came the ceaseless murmur of many voices.

Suddenly the drums broke into a thunderous roar, and as if that were a signal, the people parted, crowding back from the center of the plaza, leaving a cleared space through which came a strange procession. First a company of priests and warriors, the warriors in cloaks made of the brilliant plumage of the tropic birds and the priests in long white robes, marching to the throbbing rhythm of the drums and the measured chant of deep voices. Then into view, stepping slowly, yet in time to the drum beat, came a young girl, her hands bound behind her with gold chains, while her great dark eyes, lifted to the waiting altar, were wide with terror. Behind her, as she followed the priests and warriors up the steep steps, came a long line of slaves bearing on their shoulders burdens of rich gifts of gold and silver, beautifully dyed and woven cloth and gorgeous plumes.

"Oh, Grandfather, what is it?" whispered Mary Ellen, frightened by the picture and the throbbing, sinister music. Grandfather laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Don't be alarmed, dear. Remember it happened long, long ago. The lakes and springs that supplied their city were drying up and the Mayas were offering sacrifices to Kulkulkan, their god, asking him to restore the water to their land. You, as the maiden Ulil, were chosen as their offering."

Eagerly Mary Ellen watched the slender child climb the flower-strewn steps, followed by the slaves with their burdens. Louder and louder thundered the drums, nearer and nearer to the high altar came the little sacrifice, then as the warriors and priests separated and passed behind the altar, she moved on alone and stood before the high priest. Slowly he stepped forward, threw back his cloak of beautiful feather-work, then drawing the stone sacrificial knife from his girdle, he lifted his arms to the cloudless skies and began the savage chant of offering.

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Scarcely had the first words passed his lips, than a young warrior leaped from the group of chiefs and nobles who stood as the king's guard near the altar, and flung himself upon his knees before the high priest.

The chant stopped suddenly; each one in that great multitude held his breath to listen, and in the stillness the young brave's voice rang out trumpet clear. "Oh, Hunac Ceel, great priest of Kulkulkan, I pray thee to take me, the warrior Istayul, as a sacrifice instead of this child. Thou knowest our god prefers a willing victim, and this maiden fears to die. Seest thou not the terror in her eyes?"

Springing erect he stood, his arms folded upon his brown chest, marked with the scars of battle, waiting the high priest's answer. For a long tense moment silence reigned, then the priest spoke coldly.

"Why should the warrior Istayul offer himself as a sacrifice in place of the maiden Ulil? Do you long for the sweet peace of death?"

"Nay, O priest of Kulkulkan, I love too well the clash of battle to desire peace, but since our god desires a human sacrifice, or so you, his priest, claim, I offer myself. This child, as thou knowest, has been raised in my father's house and I love her as my sister. She fears the death of sacrifice and I would spare her. Will not Kulkulkan take a warrior in her place?"

The priest stood silent. In the stillness a solitary drum began a low throbbing, then ceased. Still Hunac Ceel, the high priest, waited, then, suddenly, with a wild cry he flung his arms aloft, the jeweled handle of the sacrificial knife making a blazing arc of light.

"I send thee a worthy offering, O Kulkulkan, a warrior who has won his head plumes in fiercest battle and wears his lip plug with honor. Take thou this sacrifice, O mighty god of the waters, and send again to thy people the gift of thy overflowing lakes and rivers."

Swiftly the knife descended. The young warrior sank slowly down before the altar. A low, deep-throated murmur rose from the crowd below, then died away. The drums burst into a triumphant thunder, then stopped suddenly as a tall white-clad priest, whose gray locks were bound back from his face with a broad band of gold studded with a single blazing jewel, stepped into view and raised his hand for silence.

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For a moment he stood, looking at the figure lying dead before him and at the kneeling, weeping girl, then he lifted his face and studied the skies as if looking for a sign. Tense silence fell over the waiting people, for this was Citan Quatu, the priest and prophet whom all loved, and none but evil-doers feared. He stretched forth his hand; all fell upon their knees.

"Oh, my people," he cried, his voice ringing through the still hot air and as he spoke the light of the blazing sun began to darken. "Behold, Kulkulkan, the great one, hides his light from thee for a warning. Too long have ye, O people of Maya, stained his altars with the blood of human sacrifice instead of offering him the fruits and the flowers he loves. I have warned thee and ye listened not. Now, once more I speak, and, as the darkness gathers listen to my words. Unless thy altars are wiped clean of human blood, and are stained no more, thy cities shall become deserted, thy temples torn asunder by the trees and vines of the jungles and men shall seek in vain for thy history."

Swiftly the sun's light was fading, as the disk of the moon covered its surface. Wails of terror resounded as the frightened people cried to Kulkulkan for mercy. Only the old priest, Citan Quatu, stood silent, his arm about the shoulder of the weeping Ulil, then as the light began to brighten he gave a signal and the drums began a low murmur. Moving forward he lifted his arms above the kneeling multitude. "Kulkulkan has heard thy cries, and once more sends his light. Heed ye his warning, O people of Maya." At these words the drums roared in triumph and songs of rejoicing rose from the kneeling people.

Slowly the scene faded from Mary Ellen's sight, the thunder of drums and the singing grew indistinct, then died away.

"What caused the darkness, Grandfather?" she asked eagerly. Grandfather smiled. "It was an eclipse, dear, that I, as Citan Quatu, the old prophet, used as a warning for my people, but they soon forgot, and now, even as I said in that long ago day, their cities are only masses of ruins and none can read their story."

"I'm sorry about the young warrior," whispered Mary Ellen, sadly. Grandfather kissed her cheek where a tear was shining. "Don't cry, dear. He paid his debt, and in the paying won a great reward, for he 'laid down his life for a friend.'"



Chapter IV

MARY, THE LITTLE ESSENE GIRL

This is the fourth of seven acts in Mary Ellen's life drama:

WHY doesn't the Bible tell more about Jesus when he was a little boy, Grandfather?" asked Mary Ellen one Sunday evening as she cuddled close to Grandfather in the big chair before the fireplace.

Grandfather smiled down at her. "Perhaps the disciples didn't know him when he was a little boy, dear, or perhaps they did not think that time of his life so important. There are other sources, however, which hold the record of his early years—the Essenes, for instance, and some day those early chapters will be given to the world; but you have no need to read those records, dear, for you played with him as a child and knew the beauty and glory of his presence."

"I, Grandfather?" cried Mary Ellen, sitting up and looking into his face with wonder-filled eyes. "Do you mean that I once knew Jesus?"

Grandfather's smile was very gentle as he answered, "Yes, dear, he had many friends, and you were one of them. Let us turn the pages and find that chapter. See how softly the afternoon sunlight

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lies over the white houses of Nazareth!" As Grandfather spoke, he slowly passed his hand before Mary Ellen's eyes, and she saw once again the little town in far-off Galilee.

It was a quiet little place; a few women filled their water jars at the stone-arched well in the center of the village street, and spoke of simple, pleasant things; from the open doorway of one of the white houses came the sound of a heavy hammer and the fresh smell of sawed wood. Glancing within, Mary Ellen saw a dark, bearded man bending over his carpenter's bench. She watched him a moment, then wandered on through the streets of the little town and up a narrow, dusty path to where a clump of dark, gnarled old fig trees cast a cool shade upon the hillside. Here she stopped, for the sound of heart-broken sobs reached her, and turning she saw a little girl upon the coarse, dry grass under the trees cuddling a young lamb in her arms and weeping bitterly. As the child lifted her tear-stained face and pushed back her hair, Mary Ellen knew that the little girl weeping upon the hillside above the city of Nazareth was herself so long ago, and she waited, watching the picture of the past unroll before her.

Suddenly into the shade stepped a young lad; his short garment of fine white linen was bound in at the waist by a scarlet belt, his shining hair fell softly about his shoulders and little strands lay damp against his forehead. Gently he knelt by the weeping child and as he spoke it seemed to Mary Ellen that never had she heard a voice so sweet, so tender.

"I heard thy sobs, Mary dear, and came quickly. Why dost thou weep, little playmate?"

The little Mary raised her tear-filled eyes to his face. "Oh, Jesus, I am so glad thou art come. See, my little Phari hath broken his leg and the shepherd saith he must be slain, and thou knowest how I love him." Again she burst into bitter sobs and leaned her head against the shoulder of the young lad. Gently he smoothed her tumbled hair back from her forehead and wiped her tears; then sitting down he lifted the lamb into his lap and looked at the injured leg. The little creature uttered a plaintive bleat of pain and then nestled its head against the gentle hands. For a moment the young Jesus bent his head; his lips moved silently, and touching again the broken place, he set the little creature upon its feet. It hesitated, took

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a step, then began to leap about, free from all hurt, while Mary looked at it with shining eyes.

"Oh, I knew thou couldst heal it. Dost thou not remember my bird which thou didst heal last year when thou wert home from the school?" She clapped her hands, the tears still shining in her eyes, but now they were tears of happiness. The young lad sat watching the little lamb, then he spoke softly, "'Tis joy to heal. Some day through these hands will flow an even greater power. For that I prepare myself."

"How dost thou do it?" questioned Mary, folding her hands in her lap and looking at him gravely.

He sat silent. She waited, watching the fair young face, which seemed to shine with an inner light. In the silence a tiny sand lizard crept close to the two and, lifting its head, fixed its shining eyes upon Jesus and lay panting. Gently he reached out his hand and stroked its head with a delicate finger tip. A bird uttered a few low notes from her nest above them, fluttered in the air a moment, then settled softly upon the lad's shoulder. He slowly turned his head and smiled at the tiny feathered guest, then glanced down as two shadowy forms slipped from behind the tree and curled up at his feet, touching his hands with their warm noses. Smilingly he stroked their silky brown fur. A lean wolf stole silently from his hiding place among the broken rocks on the slope above and joined the little group. As he came the others glanced at him but showed no sign of fear. Slowly he crept nearer until he reached the feet of Jesus, where he crouched, his fierce eyes fixed upon the wonderful face above him; then as the boy laid his hand upon the rough head, the wolf lay down with his black muzzle caressing the sandaled feet.

Mary shrank from him a little, but as Jesus saw the movement, he lifted his eyes and smiled at her. Slowly, but now without fear, she reached out and laid her hand upon the wolf's rough shoulder. Lifting his scarred old head he looked at her with eyes grown strangely gentle and, thrilled with the wonder of it, she drew him close against her knee.

Love flowed like a warm wave from Jesus' presence, bathing all the little group in its sweetness. The tiny lizard, the bird, singing a throaty little song, the lamb, weary now and lying quietly by the two foxes, felt the vibrations and knew that with him they were safe.

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At last, his eyes fixed on the distant hills, his voice deep with feeling, Jesus softly answered Mary's question: "Love is the key which opens the way for the great power of healing; love which makes all belong to one great brotherhood, Mary dear, a love so great it leaves no room for fear."

She listened, then said softly, "Thou hast learned many things in the school of the Essenes, but thou didst not need to learn love. Even as a tiny babe, or so thy mother, Mary, saith, the birds sang their songs to thee in the day and the great oxen were thy guard at night. Thou art different from others, and I grow very lonely when thou art gone from the village."

He smiled down at the serious little face, and stooping kissed her cheek. "No more tears, Mary, or thy sister, Martha, will be scolding thee again. Thou knowest how it frets her to see thee weep."

Mary laughed gleefully, rubbing the tears from her cheeks with her head scarf. "She is baking bread today," she confided, "and will have no time to notice my tears. I fear, alas, that I am a trial to her, for I love better to wander among the flowers and listen to the bird songs on the hillsides, than to do the work about the house. She fears I will never grow a proper maid."

Jesus smiled again and, picking up the tiny lizard, laid it gently upon a warm rock, then stooped to caress the little foxes. "Come, little run-away Mary, we must return. The sun is sinking behind the hills of Lebanon and Martha will be waiting for thee. My mother also will be watching for my return."

Taking her hand he started down the trail which led into the valley, where nestled the white houses of the little town, when the sound of clicking stones caused them to turn and look upward to where the trail curved. The wolf, with a low sullen growl, turned and vanished like a shadow and the little foxes darted swift as light into their burrows as around this turn came a dusty, weary horse, bearing a stalwart soldier clad in the short tunic and bearing the weapons of Rome. His face was streaked with sweat and dust, he sagged wearily in the saddle and both he and his horse bore the marks of a long journey. At sight of the two near the trail he drew rein. "What town lieth in the valley below, thou son of Judah?" he asked roughly.

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"'Tis the city of Nazareth," answered Jesus, with quiet courtesy. The little Mary pressed close to his side and pulled her white head covering about her face.

"By Bacchus, 'tis a long trail I have traveled," growled the centurion, "and the wells are far between. Hast thou water in that leathern bottle hanging over thy shoulder, or perhaps a draught of good wine?"

"'Tis water from the fountain in the village, pure and cool. Take it, soldier of Rome, for thou art welcome," and Jesus lifted the leather bottle to the man's eager hands. Carefully the centurion spilled a few drops upon the ground in offering to the gods before he drank deeply, but, thirsty though he was, he had thought for his horse and saving some of the water, he dismounted to wash the nose and mouth of the thirsty animal.

"May the gods ever grant thee a drink in thy hour of need, lad," he laughed as he swung himself again into the saddle. "Take thou this coin for thy pay. That drink will suffice me until I reach the fountain in thy village."

He carelessly tossed a rough coin into the dust at the feet of Jesus and rode down the trail without a backward glance.

Silently the young Jesus stood watching the Roman as he descended the hill clothed in a mist of dust, golden in the light of the setting sun. A strange look was upon the young face as he spoke slowly. "Ay, O soldier of Rome, I shall one day receive a drink in my hour of need, and thine will be the hand which gives it to me."

The little Mary glanced timidly into his face, wondering at the look she saw there. She could not know that he saw himself upon the cross and thirsting for water, nor did the rough centurion, descending the trail, dream that he would some day repay at the foot of that cross the drink he had received upon the Galilean hillside.

Silently the two stood looking down into the village. The sun sank lower until only an edge of gold showed above the distant hills; the bands of sheep with their shepherds began moving to their refuge for the night, and at last Mary pulled at his hand. "Come, Jesus, the evening cometh and my sister and thy mother will fear for our safety. Yonder goeth my brother Lazarus with the sheep."

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Slowly, as if his thoughts were coming back from a far journey, Jesus turned his head and looked down at the little figure. A smile, so sweet it clutched at Mary Ellen's heart as she watched the two children, curved his lips.

"Yes, little playmate, we must hasten. Home is sweet when love waits for us there, and the darkness gathers over the hills. Come, we will help Lazarus fold the sheep."

Together, hand in hand, the two hastened down the trail and as Mary Ellen watched them go the last rays of the sun folded Him about with a shining nimbus of gold.

The sun vanished, a grayness gathered over the hills and tiny points of light began to flicker in the village, then the vision slowly faded.

Mary Ellen lifted tear-dimmed eyes to Grandfather's face. "Grandfather dear, this has been the most beautiful of all the chapters in my book of life. His smile was so beautiful, so tender, I shall carry the memory of it in my heart forever."



Chapter V

NEANG, THE LITTLE CHINESE GIRL

This is the fifth of seven acts in Mary Ellen's life drama:



“ONCE upon a time,” began Grandfather as Mary Ellen cuddled into the big chair beside him, “Oh, a very long time ago, there was a great people called the Khymers, who built mighty cities by the Mekong River and the lake called the Tonle Sap, in far-off Indo-China.”

“Is this a chapter in my Book of Life?” asked Mary Ellen eagerly.

Grandfather smiled. “Yes, dear, a very strange and wonderful chapter, for these people built up a great civilization before Jesus was born. Their temples and walls and the ruins of their cities are among the most beautiful on the earth today, and one of the temples, called the Angkor Vat, remains now almost as it was when first built thousands of years ago.”

“Was I a princess there, Grandfather?” asked Mary Ellen.

Grandfather shook his head. “No, dear, you were a Chuang, which means a slave. The Khymers were great warriors and brought back many captives to build their walls and temples and to dig the lakes and canals about their cities.”

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"I don't believe I like having been a slave," said Mary Ellen slowly.

"But, my dear, we are born where we can best learn the lessons needed for each life. The Lords of Karma know exactly what we need. Shall we open the Book, my dear?"

Mary Ellen nodded eagerly, her little feeling of hurt pride at having once been a slave vanished, and she nestled close against Grandfather's shoulder as he passed his hand gently before her eyes.

Swiftly the curtain of time rolled back and she found herself standing in a wide street watching a long line of sweating slaves bearing great burdens upon their heads, marching into the city through a carved stone gateway. Above the great gate stood a square tower upon each side of which was carved a giant face, the face of Siva, one of the gods of the Khymer.

How strangely familiar it all seemed; the hurrying crowds, clad in their bright colored *sampots*, or strips of cloth wrapped about their brown bodies, their arms heavy with copper or gold bracelets, and many of them with bright flowers twisted into their smooth black hair. Troops of spearmen and shield-weaponed soldiers marched by to the tap of little drums, followed by a column of laden elephants. They were going out to the frontier to fight the Thais, who were growing ever more bold in their attacks upon the cities which lay along the Khymer border. Horses and chariots dashed past, sweetmeat vendors called their wares in soft sing-song speech, while high over the busy city with its beautiful buildings, lakes, and fountains, rose the towers of Angkor Vat like gray stone lace against the sunlit sky.

Suddenly Mary Ellen saw a little girl forcing her way through the crowd about the gate. Little and brown-skinned, her bright colored *sampot* wrapped about her slim little body, her blue-black hair roughened by the crowd, a limp jasmine flower drooping above one ear, she looked hot and tired, and traces of tears showed on her round cheeks. Presently she gained the long causeway which led to the great Vat, or temple, and dropped down to rest a moment beneath the shade of a huge stone Naga, or seven-headed serpent, which bordered the long approach to the temple.

Mary Ellen moved closer. Something seemed to whisper that this little girl had been herself when the Khymer were masters of all that land.

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As she watched, the child rose to her feet and again hurried forward to where a group of slaves was moving some heavy stones into place at the edge of the temple lake. Urgently she caught the arm of one who seemed to be in charge of the other slaves, and said softly, "Father, I would speak with thee."

The man looked about and seeing that his overseer was at the other side of the lake, bent toward the child.

"What brings thee here, Neang? 'Tis not well for thee to be so far from thy mother—especially on this day," he added in a lower tone.

"It was that which brought me to thee, my father," whispered the little Neang, twisting her hands together. "When I came from the Bayon, where I went to chat with the old priest Piphok, (for he loves to have me help him with his flowers), a group of Chuang was whispering by the steps and one of them said—Oh, father, surely it is not true—that tonight the Chuang will rise and slay the king and all his people."

Quickly, and glancing fearfully about him, her father covered her lips with his hand.

"Speak not so loudly, child. Dost wish that we shall all be tortured and slain because of thy rash speech?"

"But, father, is it true?" insisted Neang, her eyes wide with terror as she whispered the question.

For a moment her father watched her, then said slowly, "Go home to thy mother, Neang. Thou art too young to know of the thing we plan. Thy mother was to take thee beyond the city walls this afternoon where thou wouldst be safe. Go quickly, lest it be too late—and child, forget the thing you heard."

He turned back to his work as another slave joined the group, hesitated a moment, then muttered, "Remember, Chuang, tonight when the temple gongs ring, we strike," before he hurried away to carry his message farther.

Again Neang crept to her father's side and whispered fearfully, "Will the Chuang kill the Princess Somut?"

"My child, thou dost not understand. We have slaved for the Khymers for countless years, and now we are strong enough to strike and gain our freedom. All the Khymers must die, or we cannot be free."

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"But father," cried Neang, "she is not cruel. She is sweet and good, and often we have played together on the terrace of the Leper King, and she has taken me to the palace gardens and we ate sweet-meats and tried to catch the goldfish in the fountain. She shall not die," and the little Neang stamped her foot angrily.

Her father touched her hair gently. "Thou canst not save her if the Chuang strike."

Neang sobbed softly as she turned away, but in her eyes there was the gleam of a determination to save the little Princess Somut. Slowly, quietly, as if thinking deeply, she moved through the wide streets to where the old temple of the Bayon reared its grim towers in homage to Siva. Beyond it, before the Terrace of Honor, a troupe of war-elephants was marching in battle formation, while the king, under his gold umbrella, watched the animals and soldiers. Suddenly one of the elephants threw up his trunk and trumpeted savagely; another and another answered, until it seemed to Mary Ellen as if the great beasts knew the terrible doom which hung over the king and all his nobles, and were sounding an alarm.

For a moment the little Neang listened, then moved up the worn steps to where an old priest was standing.

"What is it, child?" he asked kindly, as she came near. "There are tears in thy eyes, yet thou wert happy this morning when I saw thee. What has brought thee sorrow?"

Neang did not answer his gentle question except by another one. "Art thou tending the temple fires tonight?" she asked softly.

"Yes, for the first part of the night. Dost thou want to come and carry the sacred oil for thy old friend Piphok?"

Neang nodded, then murmuring a soft "goodby," she moved silently away toward the palace.

The sun was sinking rapidly, already long shadows of the temple towers lay across the wide streets and the smooth waters of the lakes. The elephants had finished their drill and had been marched away to their quarters, while the king and his guard, their silks and jewels brilliant in the slanting rays of the sun, were moving up the wide steps to the Terrace of Honor. Soon the swift tropic night would fall and the temple priests, unknowingly, would ring the signal for the Chuang to rise and slay.

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It was not difficult for Neang to slip through the slaves' entrance to the palace garden, for the guard knew that often the Princess Somut had played with her. Neither was it difficult for Neang to find the princess, for of all the lovely garden, Somut loved best the tree-shaded fountain where the goldfish swam.

Silently Neang moved through the flowering shrubs and seeing Somut, called softly. With a happy little cry the princess ran and caught her hand.

"I am glad thou hast come. Let us—" but Neang interrupted her swiftly.

"I have a new game for today, O Princess. Wilt thou trust me and come where I lead you?"

The little princess hesitated. "My old nurse will be cross," she said slowly. "She does not want me to leave the garden today."

"I know," whispered Neang, "but I will take good care of thee and she need not know we are gone. We will leave thy jewels here on the bench—so those in the street will not notice thee so much—and slip away and I will show thee many new things."

Yielding to Neang, the little Somut threw her bracelets and anklets upon the stone bench and hand in hand the two slipped away through the garden, and, when the guard's back was turned, through the gate into the street.

Only a few moments now before the sun would drop from sight and the temple gongs begin their musical thunder, yet until the darkness fell Neang dared not lead the little princess through the great plaza, so she drew her into the shelter of a clump of bamboos close by the Elephant Wall.

The sun sank and swiftly the tropic darkness covered the city. The evening fires in the temples flared, and Neang, catching Somut's hand, drew her swiftly toward the grim shelter of the Bayon.

"Come, little princess, we must hasten," she cried and together the two ran up the stone steps just as the brazen gongs began their evening call to prayer.

As the first gong sounded, the city burst into wild tumult. Thousands upon thousands of slaves, waiting through long years for this savage moment of revenge, poured from every alley and street, waving the weapons each had hidden for this day. The red light of

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blazing torches gleamed on their rage-filled faces as they rushed toward the palace.

Catching the little Somut, weeping with terror, closer to her, Neang fled into the darkness of a deserted temple room. Outside the roar grew wilder and from the main halls of the Bayon rushed the priests of the temple, bearing weapons, for the thing they had feared for years had come to pass. Only the old priest, Piphok, stood by the altar as the two children crept into the great room.

"Hide us, oh, hide us quickly," sobbed Neang. The old priest looked once into the well-known little face of the Princess Somut, then putting a sheltering arm about the two terror-stricken children, and taking a lamp from the altar, moved down a corridor to hide them in a place of safety.

Slowly Mary Ellen opened her eyes. "But, Grandfather, did they ever find the little princess?"

"No, dear," comforted Grandfather gently, "thy father and mother and the old priest Piphok, after those terrible days were over, took the princess and you, and moved to another land, and no one ever knew that she was the last of all the Khymers."



Chapter VI

PIERRE, THE LITTLE FRENCH BOY

This is the sixth of seven acts in Mary Ellen's life drama:

MARY ELLEN looked up from where she sat in one corner of the big couch. "Grandfather," she asked, a questioning little frown creasing her brow, "was I ever a little boy?"

Grandfather laughed as he laid down his book and looked at her over his glasses. "Of course, dear, you have been a boy many, many times, but why frown about it? Boys are really quite nice."

Laughing, Mary Ellen climbed into his lap. "Open my Book, please," she coaxed, "and show me one time when I was a little boy."

Grandfather's face was grave as he touched her forehead. "This may not be a happy chapter, dear, but remember in God's great plan all things work together for good." As he smoothed her brow, Mary Ellen found herself standing in front of a gray old building which an inner voice whispered was the prison La Force in Paris.

A rain mixed with snow was falling and the filthy streets were ankle-deep in cold slush. A few roughly dressed people hurried by,

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each wearing the red cap of the Revolution and most of them armed with knives or pikes. The houses along the streets were decorated with little pikes stuck over their doors, each with a jaunty red cap upon its point, while scrawled across the walls was the slogan of the Revolution—"Republic One and Indivisible, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, or Death."

Mary Ellen shuddered. An awful pall of terror and hate seemed to hang over the city. She thought of the things Grandfather had once told her of that dreadful time, how the French peasants, made savage by the selfishness and cruelty of those who ruled, had turned upon their rulers, killing guilty and innocent alike, and she wondered what part she had played in those terrible days.

With this thought she found herself drifting through damp, dark corridors, up steep stone steps, until she stood gazing into a long, low-ceiled room, its walls and floor of a gray stone, its ceiling crossed by heavy beams. A table stretched the length of the room, lighted by a few guttering candles; about the tables, a group of ladies sat sewing, reading, or writing, while chatting with them, or moving about in idle groups, were men and a few children. Although they were prisoners, they had not lost the exquisite manners and charming courtesies which marked the true aristocrat of that day, and soft, gentle laughter rippled forth at some witty word, while the low voices held no note of fear.

Suddenly a door leading into the hallway clanged back and the chief jailer, followed by two others, stepped into the room. Instantly every voice was hushed and a tense silence settled over the prisoners.

"Come, citizens," he shouted in his coarse voice, "and listen to the invitation of La Belle Guillotine." His assistants laughed loudly at his joke, but a little shiver of terror passed over the crowded room, for this was the list of those who were to die that day. An assistant lifted his lantern to throw its light upon the long paper and the jailer began calling the names.

Not one made the slightest cringe of fear. Perhaps a cheek grew whiter, or lips quivered for a moment, then with stately bow or sweeping courtesy, each one whose name was called bade farewell to those he left behind, and moved forward to take his place with those condemned to die. No cowards here. Even though they had not known, perhaps, how to live wisely, yet they knew how to die bravely,

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and Mary Ellen felt a warm glow of pride as she realized that once she had been one of them. Twenty names were called, then the jailer read slowly, "Citizen, once the Marquis d'Aulay, and his wife."

Mary Ellen felt a sudden fear. That name—surely she knew it. Anxiously she watched a tall man, clad in silk, his ruffles of rich lace falling gracefully over his slim white hands, step slowly forward, leading a beautiful woman whose face was white with sorrow. Turning, she swept her heavy silken skirts in a courtesy to those she was leaving forever, her husband bowing low at her side, then they moved quietly to their places. Now at last half-stifled sobs were heard and suddenly a little lad, dressed as the Marquis in silks and lace, burst from the friendly arms of a white-haired lady, and fled across the room.

"Father, Mother," he cried, clutching his father's hand, "let me go with you—I cannot live without you."

The mother stooped and gathered him close in her arms, her tears falling on his dark hair, then the Marquis took his arm and led him gently back. "My son, my little son, do not weep. Remember, Pierre, it may be only for a little time—tomorrow thy name may be read, and if so, go bravely, without tears, for thou wilt be the last of all thy race and its memory must not be stained by any lack of bravery." Bending his head closer to the sobbing boy, his father whispered softly, "Thou knowest Millay may be able to help thee escape tonight as he planned. Too late now for all but thee, but if he comes, go with him—"

"We are waiting, citizen," called the jailer sharply, and the little Pierre had only time for one last embrace and the whispered words, "I will go bravely—either with Millay or to death."

The door clanged behind the condemned; soon could be heard the shouts and yells of the savage crowds waiting in the streets, then the dull rumble of the clumsy tumbrils as they rolled away to the guillotine.

The gentle old lady held Pierre close, trying to shield him from hearing the noise in the streets. Presently she whispered, for often there were spies about, "Dry thy tears, my little one. We will soon follow where thy father and mother are going, but thou, tonight, may have one tiny chance to escape. If thy old servant, Millay, is able to carry out his plan—too late, alas, for thy father and mother—

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you may find safety. Rest now, and when thou art safe from this terrible place, remember us who loved thee dearly."

Night stole into the prison, making it more gloomy than ever. The prisoners were locked in their sleeping quarters and guards dozed in the hallways, or left huge dogs to watch in their stead. Darker and darker grew the corridors as their candles guttered out, and suddenly Mary Ellen felt as if someone were slipping softly past her, a key clinked against a lock, a low whisper sounded, then two shadowy forms moved silently by. Fear chilled her. She knew those two shadowy shapes were Pierre and his old servant. Could they escape? Then a memory of that long ago day came and she knew that old Millay had served as a guard in the prison and had carefully planned each dangerous step, until at last the two stood in the street.

"Are we safe, Millay?" whispered Pierre, as they crouched in a partly sheltered archway.

"Not yet, my little Marquis," answered the faithful old man. "Many long miles are before us yet. Pull the rags I brought thee closer about thy shoulders and set thy red cap more firmly in place. We will have to brave the streets."

As he spoke, a crowd of people rushed into the street, singing and shouting, waving their blood-stained knives and bayonets, tossing their blazing torches high in the air, and whirling round and round in a wild, savage dance.

"Crouch down again," whispered Millay, in terror, hiding the boy's body as best he might. "Pray that they do not see us. They are dancing the terrible Carmagnole—they are mad with blood—"

Such a wild, frightful scene—the snowy streets lighted by the flaming torches, the savagely dancing, singing, blood-stained people—Mary Ellen gazed at it in horror, until with a last wild cry, flinging their arms high over their heads, they swooped off toward the square where the guillotine stood.

Without a word Millay grasped the frightened child's hand and hurried him away into the darkness, down narrow alleys, hiding sometimes to let a crowd rush by, then on to where an old horse stood hitched to a cart piled high with coarse hay.

Carefully Millay hid the little Marquis beneath the hay, then drove joltingly toward the gates of the city.

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"Halt, citizen, who goes there?"

"Francois Millay, citizen-guard. Here are my papers."

"You are leaving late tonight, citizen. What news of La Belle Guillotine? Did she drink well today?"

"Very deeply, indeed, citizen-guard. Sixty-two, I think they said."

"Fine, fine, and more tomorrow. Vive La Guillotine! Citizen, pass on. I have countersigned your papers."

On into the darkness, oh so slowly, and so many, many miles before they would be safe. Glimpses came to Mary Ellen of that flight, the hiding by day, the slow weary travel by night, the cold and the rain and the fear, then at last safety in England with true friends who had previously escaped the guillotine.

Mary Ellen sat up and looked sadly into Grandfather's kind old face.

"I'm glad, Grandfather, that I was one of those in prison, instead of among those terrible people I saw in the streets."

Grandfather smoothed her hair gently. "Do not judge them, dear. Only God can do that, for only He really knows all they suffered before they became the savage, hate-filled, pitiless people you saw. Injustice, cruelty, and selfishness always bring about such terrible things, but some day humanity will learn the great lesson of love and then such scenes will never come again. This has been a sad chapter for you to see, dear, but next time we will open the Book at one with only happy pictures in it."



Chapter VII

VIRGINIA, THE LITTLE AMERICAN GIRL

This is the seventh of seven acts in Mary Ellen's life drama :

PUT down your paper, Grandfather," coaxed Mary Ellen, "and open my Book for me. You remember you promised to show me a happy chapter this time."

Grandfather laid down his paper and smiled at the eager little girl as he put his glasses into their case.

"This will be the latest complete chapter in your Book, dear," he said gently, as Mary Ellen climbed into his lap, "but you must remember that you are writing in this present life another wonderful part. Each day you are making the pictures, and should strive to keep your pages free from scenes of selfishness and hatred. Now rest your head on my shoulder, dear, and we will turn to the past." Gently he touched her forehead.

A burst of gay laughter came to Mary Ellen as she found herself watching a happy little group sitting on the steps of a big white house, the tall corniced pillars of which were dappled with the shadows of the great elms which lined the long driveway leading to it, while behind the house she could catch a glimpse of a neat row of

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white-washed cabins before whose doors a dozen or more little black pickaninnies were playing.

"Where is it, Grandfather," whispered Mary Ellen softly.

"In Virginia, dear, before the Civil War. Your father in that life owned a large plantation and had hundreds of slaves."

As he spoke a curly-haired girl ran across the wide veranda and down to the other children. In her little hoopskirt of flower-sprigged dimity, with her shining curls, and her tiny black slippers tied with narrow blue ribbons about her ankles, she was a charming little lady of that happy time.

"Oh, I am so happy today!" she cried as she reached the others. "Father told me he would grant me any wish I might make, for this is my birthday you know."

"Oh, Virginia, what will you wish," they asked, crowding about her to offer all sorts of suggestions.

"I haven't really decided yet," she answered laughingly, "but I'll tell you all at my party this evening. Run along now, for I have to help mother and Mammy Lou make the cakes for tonight."

"Be sure and have lots of icing on them," called one of the boys as he leaped upon his waiting horse and, followed by his black servant, rode down the long driveway toward home. The others lived just across the wide fields and their merry voices drifted back to Virginia as they passed from sight. For a moment she stood waving to them, then turned to enter the house, but stopped as a soft old voice called gently, "Little missy, little missy. Jes' a minute, chile."

Turning she stood smiling down at the old negro who limped toward her up the driveway.

"What is it, Uncle Moses? Is your rheumatism hurting you again today?"

The old man chuckled, "No, indeedy, missy, dat rheumatism ob mine done lef' me today. Reckon it'd better 'caze I'se shore gwine dance at yo' bufday party. Lawsy, you's fifteen today. Don' seem dat long since yo' mammy laid you in my arms to look at. Reckon I'se rocked you to sleep in dese black arms many an' many a time, and now you's most growed up."

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Virginia laughed gaily. "Yes, and father promised me anything I wished for my birthday present. What shall I ask for, Uncle Moses?"

"Reckon ole Mose cain't tell a little gal whut to ask for. You jes' suit yo'self, little missy." Then his face lost its smile and he stood turning his hat around in his gnarled black hands.

"What is it that troubles you, Uncle Moses?" asked Virginia gently.

"Nothin', missy, nothin'. 'Tain't right to tell you sad things on yo' bufday, but I was jes' talkin' to Ole Jim, whut belongs to Massa Squire Carter. Ole Jim was tellin' me dat de Squire done sold Jim's oldest boy down south. Ole Jim's heart purt nigh bruk—he done think a lot ob dat boy o' his'n—mos' as much as I do my Joe."

"Oh, how dreadful," cried Virginia, the quick tears springing to her eyes, "I am so sorry for Old Jim, but don't you worry about my father selling any of you down south. He won't ever do that."

"No, reckon not, missy. Yo' pappy am mighty good to us black folks. Reckon as how he'd never do it 'less he have to. Dey say de Squire had to hab some money mighty quick and he done got a good price for Jim's boy. 'Scuse me tellin' you dat about Ole Jim, missy. I hadn't ought to spoil yo' bufday."

The old man limped away, but the little Virginia stood a long time looking toward the row of slave quarters which lay close to the big house before she turned and went quietly through the high-arched doorway.

What a busy scene met Mary Ellen's eyes as she followed Virginia into the great kitchen. Such a stirring and baking, such a clatter of tongues, and such delicious odors as were wafted into the air when the lids of the big pots were lifted. Mammy Lou, the fat, laughing, black queen of that domain, ruled with a firm hand, giving orders to this willing worker or to that one, but she allowed no one to attend to the great birthday cake but herself.

"You come here, honey," she called, as she caught sight of her little mistress standing in the doorway, "an' see if you-all likes dis decoration. I'se shore gwine turn yo' out a mighty purty bufday cake, chile. Dere ain't gwine be a finer one in dis county."

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"Why, of course there won't," agreed Virginia, watching the old woman's deft black fingers as she molded leaves and delicately-colored flowers and made them into a wreath on the huge white surface of the cake, "because there isn't a better cook in this county than my Mammy Lou." Laughingly she flung her arms about the old woman's fat waist and hugged as much of her as she could reach around.

Swift little glimpses of that busy, happy day flashed before Mary Ellen's eyes—the great table set for fifty guests, the huge ballroom decorated with flowers and with many candles waiting to be lighted in the great chandelier which hung its shining pendants from the ceiling; then the hurry to put on the new party dress draped over the wide hoopskirt and trimmed with rows of tiny pink rosebuds, tying the slipper ribbons, putting on the silky white lace mitts, pinning a rose amid the dark curls, then touching with happy fingers the lovely gifts which were arriving from friends and loved ones, and at last—the party itself.

The rooms were bright with many candles, sweet with the perfume of flowers within and without, and filled with a happy, laughing crowd of friends, both young and old. Mammy Lou waited close by the dining-room door to catch the words of praise from the guests as Sam, the old butler, and his helpers carried in course after course. From the ballroom, as the dinner grew finally toward its close, could be heard old Uncle Moses and his little band of musicians tuning up for the dance for which the young people's feet were already tapping.

At last the ladies withdrew from the table with the young folk, leaving the men to their own diversions, and the eagerly waited-for fun began. Mary Ellen thought she had never looked upon a lovelier scene than this one in the big ballroom with its soft night breezes. The grace of those old-fashioned, courtly dances, the shimmer of silks and ribbons, the gleam of shining curls and laughing eyes made a vivid picture of happiness.

Suddenly the music stopped as Virginia's father lifted his hand for attention.

"My friends," he began in his deep, laughing, kindly voice, "I was rash enough to promise Virginia anything she might wish on this birthday and now she declares she will hold me to my promise. She said she would make her request tonight, and I am hoping desperately that she will not ask something too difficult for me to do."

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A little burst of laughter and suggestions rang out from the merry, waiting dancers, then they fell silent, watching Virginia as she stood twisting her slim fingers together, hesitating, half-fearing to ask the thing upon which she had set her heart.

Gently her father reached out and drew her within the circle of his arm. "What is it dear? You know I will gladly grant your wish, even if it be the half of my kingdom," he added laughingly, "for you have been the joy of our hearts for every one of your fifteen years."

Virginia lifted shining eyes to his face. "Oh, father, you are so good to me, and I am asking for more than half your kingdom, for" —she hesitated a long moment, then spoke softly—"I am asking you to set all our slaves free as your birthday gift to me."

A murmur of surprise and incredulity arose, but Virginia had no thought for anything but her father's answer. Would he refuse? Tensely she waited, and in the silence there came a whisper from old Uncle Moses, "O dear Lawd, please hab ole Massa set us free."

At the sound of that fervent prayer his "ole Massa" lifted his eyes to Moses' face, then smiled down at Virginia. "Truly you have asked for a great gift, my dear, but I will keep my promise to you. Tomorrow morning they shall all have their freedom papers. Do you want to tell them tonight?"

Sobbing with joy, Virginia flung her arms about her father's neck and kissed his cheek, as Uncle Moses limped away to call the other slaves. How quickly the glad news spread; how swiftly they came crowding into the great hall, their eyes shining with happiness as they pushed forward to kiss Virginia's hands and give her their thanks. Only Uncle Moses began to look worried, and at last he pushed his way to his master's side and pulled his sleeve. "But Massa," he asked, an anxious note in his old voice, "does dese yere freedom papers mean we-all has to leave the plantation? Why, Massa John, us folks cain't go 'way from yere. We'se been born and raised yere, and I reckon we'd purt nigh die o' longin' if you sent us away."

A quick warm look of happiness flooded into his master's eyes as he laid his hand on the old man's trembling shoulder. "Why, Uncle Mose, of course you won't have to leave. This is your home as it is mine, and besides how could I handle this big place without

MARY ELLEN THROUGH THE AGES

you? The only difference it need make is that you will have a share of what we make, and no matter what happens to me, you will all be safe."

The old man threw up his hands, "Now, de Lawd be praised," he cried, "dat takes de las' cloud from ma' heart. Go on back to yo' quarters, black folks, and let little missy's party git a-gwine."

Laughing and singing, their voices an excited babble, all tramped away and soon the sound of strumming banjos and patting feet drifted up to the big house, while in the ballroom old Uncle Moses' fiddle seemed trying to burst its strings for very happiness, and Virginia's joyous face told that this had been the most wonderful of birthdays.

"Oh, that was a happy chapter!" laughed Mary Ellen, as she lifted her head from Grandfather's shoulder.

Grandfather smiled. "All chapters are happy when they are filled with work and thought for others. As Virginia, you learned the sweet joy that comes from bringing happiness to others. Remember this, dear, when you are writing the new chapters of your life, that true happiness comes only through unselfish, loving service to those about you. Through such service we fill our Book of Life with beautiful pictures and weave for ourselves a 'soul garment' of radiant beauty. Now, it is bedtime, dear. Goodnight, and may sweet dreams attend thy slumber."

The End

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